WE BELIEVE IN GAMBLING

January 17, 1988, 11:00 a.m. Worship Service

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Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago

Scripture
Genesis 1:1-5
Matthew 25:14-30

"The one who had received the five talents went at once and traded with them, and made five talents more." --Matthew 25:16

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Twenty-five years ago, April 1963, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was in a Birmingham Jail cell. I believe the charges were parading without a permit. In any event his incarceration was one of many he experienced for leading and participating in protest demonstrations aimed at segregationist law. Often the demonstrations involved choosing a particularly onerous and unjust law, intentionally breaking it and consciously choosing to be jailed in order to test the law and in order to bring public attention to the entire confrontation. The assumption was that this basically just society, resting on its constitutional foundation, sooner or later was going to be persuaded to right itself and eliminate injustice and legislate, if not personal morality, then at least common justice.

Who will ever forget those days? The nightly news carried the deeply disturbing pictures of the confrontations; students sitting at segregated lunch counters - being jeered, having food poured down their necks, spat upon, then clubbed and kicked; dogs and fire hoses and state police. And while it was evident that things were changing in a radical way and that there was no question about who was right and who was wrong, many people who sympathized with the goal of the movement - an integrated society - found themselves wondering if it weren't happening too fast; if there weren't more moderate ways of pressing the case; if it were necessary to risk violence.

Among those moderate white people, were eight prominent Alabama clergy - four Bishops, three ministers, one Rabbi - who published a statement to that effect and criticized Dr. King. His response, "A Letter from Birmingham Jail," April 16, 1963, has become a Christian classic. It will be read for generations. In fact, it will be read for as long as people are reading about what it means to be a faithful disciple of Jesus Christ.

One thing that people forgot, and still forget, about Martin Luther King, Jr., was that he was a scholar: that the Dr. before his name was not an honorary degree (although he had plenty of those) nor was it a professional Doctorate. It was a Ph.D., earned and awarded and defended by Boston University. King could have taught theology and ethics anywhere. So when he took pen in hand, and had time to put his mind to it - which he certainly had sitting in jail - the result was eloquent, finely reasoned, grounded in historical scholarship and enormously persuasive because the writer could have been sitting in a book-lined study at Harvard.

It's a great document and it's good to read it on the anniversary of Dr. King's birth. As I did that last week I was struck by the familiar tension which prompted the letter in 1963, a tension still in our hearts - between two opposite poles: call one pole - taking chances, the other - not taking chances; the invitation to obedient discipleship the other pole - the invitation to security and safety. On the one hand the exhilaration of following Jesus; on the other hand the comfort of not doing anything too radical. The first pole requires gambling: risk-taking as a part of discipleship. The second, is suspicious of gambling and always chooses safety, security with no risk-taking.

In King's letter to the moderate white clergy he calls the roll of those people of God whose names we invoke so frequently: Jesus, Paul, Martin Luther, John Bunyan, Abraham Lincoln, Thomas Jefferson. The one thing they have in common is that for their deepest convictions, for the call of the Holy God in their hearts, they were willing to risk all, to put everything on the line in a kind of ultimate gamble.

Martin Luther King, Jr., himself, lived like that - with great intentionality. When - five years later - the risk was taken one too many times, when he gambled and lost - he had already won...

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"For it will be as when a man going on a journey called his servants and entrusted to them his property; to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away. He who had received the five talents went at once and traded with them; and he made five talents more. So also, he who had the two talents made two talents more. But he who had received the one talent went and dug in the ground and hid his master's money. Now after a long time the master of those servants came and settled accounts with them. And he who had received the five talents came forward, bringing five talents more, saying, 'Master, you delivered to me five talents; here I have made five talents more.' His master said to him, 'Well done, good and faithful servant; you have been faithful over a little, I will set you over much; enter into the joy of your master.' And he also who had the two talents came forward, saying, 'Master, you delivered to me two talents; here I have made two talents more.' His master said to him, 'Well done, good and faithful servant; you have been faithful over a little, I will set you much; enter into the joy of your master.' He also who had received the one talent came forward, saying, 'Master, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not winnow; so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours.' But

his master answered him, 'You wicked and slothful servant! You knew that I reap where I have not sowed, and gather where I have not winnowed? Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and at my coming I should have received what was my own with interest. So take the talent from him, and give it to him who has the ten talents. For to every one who has will more be given, and he will have abundance; but from him who has not, even what he has will be taken away. And cast the worthless servant into the outer darkness; there men will weep and gnash their teeth.'" [Matthew 25:14-30]

I have always thought that this is one of the most compelling stories Jesus ever told. A careful, prudent man decides that the stakes are so large he cannot take a chance - and ends up losing everything. Two other men who gambled, who risked losing, but who won, were rewarded. The story is about Jesus and the church. It is about the meaning of faith. It is about life. And it is about gambling, taking chances, risking.

On the day I began serious study of this text Sports Illustrated arrived. And on page 22 there was an article entitled "Why, O Why, Did Pat Stand Pat?" It was about the decision the Auburn football coach made on New Year's Day, with four seconds left in the Sugar Bowl. His team was behind by three points, had the ball near the Syracuse goal line and he had to decide whether to use his one chance to win the game - which meant the very real possibility of losing, or, elect to kick a field goal which, under the circumstances was not very risky and would result in a tie score. The coach elected to kick the field goal. The groan, which began with his own players, was heard all the way in the Sports Illustrated office which editorialized: "(He) forgot the basic premise of sport: **Win the game.**"

Now, in the whole scheme of things, who won or lost or tied the 1988 Sugar Bowl is not important at all. In fact there is an insistent voice in our culture suggesting that winning is not so important, that the basic premise is to play as well as you are able and to enjoy the game. And I agree with that, except I have always found that I enjoy the game a lot more when I win it. One time, in the middle of what was called a "Fun Run" for some charitable cause, I suggested to the person I was running with, who happened to be my daughter, that if we picked up the pace we could pass the people just ahead and she said, "It's supposed to be a fun run, Dad." And I said, "I know that and passing those people is going to be fun."

That's a character defect in me. And perhaps so in this culture, that insists on being number one, on seeing everything as a win/lose option and therefore has enormous difficulty dealing with any engagement, any encounter, in which it is not a winner. It is a serious defect which needs loving and persistent critique. But in a broader context risk-taking, gambling, extending oneself, putting it all on the line, does seem to have something to do with full human life.

History has certainly been shaped by people willing to risk. Have you ever stood beside a Conestoga wagon in a museum and thought about the risks the early settlers were willing to take? Ever read their journals or read books about them and find yourself nearly in tears at their simple bravery and quiet willingness to risk everything? Ever stand by those

three tiny ships moored at Jamestown and think about the enormous risks taken by those folk who actually left their settled lives in Great Britain and climbed aboard and sailed over the ocean to get here? Or have you ever stood in Independence Hall and reflected on that moment when, in the summer of 1776, they came forward, one by one, and signed a document its author, Thomas Jefferson, called a Declaration of Independence, and in that act gambled their "lives, fortunes, and sacred honor" against some heavy odds?

Now, a disclaimer would be in order. The gambling about which we are talking is not wagering on the ponies, or playing the lottery. That would appear to be a harmless diversion but for some it becomes a destructive sickness and for many it is a cruel hoax - an invitation to risk hunger on the very remote possibility of instant affluence. That is something for which we should be ashamed... This taking money from poor people to fund governmental services the rest of us are unwilling to pay for - and then spending part of the take to create TV commercials urging the poor to toss away even more money... I'm ashamed of that and it is not the gambling in which I believe.

We do, however, believe in gambling because one time Jesus told a story which associates gambling with the life to which he calls his disciples.

Let's look again at the story. A wealthy man divided his assets between his servants before departing on a journey. The amounts were not insignificant - maybe $5,000, $2,000, and $1,000. What the story doesn't tell us, but what Jesus' hearers knew, was the Rabbinical law which held that "a man who buries property entrusted to him is no longer liable because he has taken the safest course conceivable." [Eduard Schweizer, The Good News According to Matthew, p. 471]

When the man returned he discovered that two of his servants had invested the money and doubled it. Both were called "good and faithful servants." Both were rewarded.

The third servant had hidden the money in the ground. When the master returned he gave back the exact amount. He tried to explain his behavior on the basis of his master's harshness and high expectations. But the master knows that what the man did was essentially for the purpose of saving himself. He had removed himself from personal liability. No risks. No gambling. No wins - but no losses. No ecstasy - but no despair either. Things are the way they used to be. Life goes on. It's better to be conservative: to be cautious and safe and hold on to what you have... Right? Wrong! The man is treated as severely as anyone in the New Testament. What he had is taken from him and he is unceremoniously dumped into the outer darkness.

What do you suppose would have transpired had the first two servants lost a portion or all of the money? There had to have been some risk in what they did. They could have lost it all; and after last October that experience is no longer an abstraction in this culture. We don't know the answer, of course, but it is consistent with the internal ideology of this story - to propose that they still would not have been treated as harshly as the servant who played it safe and refused to take any chances at all.

New Testament scholar Eduard Schweizer comments, "The parable is aimed at those devoted to their own personal security, devoted to the vindication of their own righteousness rather than being devoted to God, which means being devoted to other people, taking active steps to help them." [Ibid, p. 472]

And taking risky steps. What is riskier than getting involved with people? Is there a greater gamble anywhere than standing up before God and your family and friends and saying - "I take you to be my wife - for better or for worse, in sickness and in health...as long as we both shall live." The odds are not much better than 50/50 on that one. "Safe sex" is the oxymoron of the year. Sex is never safe. Sex gets people involved with people and that is gloriously risky business.

Having children is risky... Giving your heart to any relationship is risky. Having parents is risky. Opening heart and soul and arms to anyone is a big gamble.

Friday night the Session of this Church gambled by saying that we will Adopt-a-Home under the Habitat for Humanity organization. We don't know exactly how we're going to get it done; but we're going to open ourselves and get ourselves involved with these folk and there are some risks. Among them that some of us might have to roll up our sleeves and donate our labor; and there is always the risk of hitting your thumb with a hammer - which, if you have ever done so, you know is no small gamble.

Do you really want to make a difference? Do you want to leave the world a better place, do your part for justice, freedom? It probably can't be done without taking a chance. Who will ever forget Adlai Stevenson's eloquent honesty when someone asked how he felt after his overwhelming defeat and he said, "I'm too old to cry, but it hurts too badly to laugh." Do you want to put your faith in Jesus, to work and make a difference in the lives of people who need you? It's risky business.

Madeleine L'Engle writes: "Those of us who try to follow his way have a choice, either to go with him as universe-disturbers or to play it safe. Playing it safe ultimately leads to personal diminishment and death." [A Stone for a Pillow,p. 84]

There is deep within us a need for security and a strong inclination not to take chances: to devote our energy, intelligence, imagination and love to the noble cause of building for ourselves a future without risk. And it is the wisdom of the ages that something dies within us when we decide to live like that. More to the point, according to Jesus, that holiest place of all in us - our soul - withers and dies when we start looking around for places to bury the assets for safekeeping.

The loveliest thing C. S. Lewis ever said, out of his own love, but also out of his own grief, was on this subject. I think we ought to read it to one another at least once a year. It is from The Four Loves:

"To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything and your heart will certainly be wrung and possible broken. If you want to be sure

of keeping it intact, you must give your heart to no one, not even to an animal. Wrap it carefully round with hobbies and little luxuries: avoid all entanglements: lock it up safe in the casket or coffin of your selfishness. But in that casket - safe, dark, motionless, airless - it will change. It will not be broken: it will become unbreakable... The alternative to tragedy, or at least the risk of tragedy, is damnation. The only place outside of heaven where you can be perfectly safe from all the dangers of love is hell."

Jesus defined the life of faith, it seems, as a gamble.

The Philosophers have always known that reason will take us only so far. There comes a time when we must take a "leap of faith," betting our lives that in the dark void of nothingness there is a presence - a welcoming, loving, parental God.

And the one we know as Lord, knew that more thoroughly and lived it more eloquently than anyone in all of history.

He told this story to his disciples in the midst of the biggest gamble in his life. It was the last week, and the small company had just returned from a bitter confrontation with the Scribes and Pharisees at the Temple. The die was now cast. He had gambled in coming to the city. He had taken great risks in going to the Temple. And now he was saying to them: "This is how it is. This is what it means to give your heart to God. This is what it means to belong to me: to love enough to risk everything."

It is a story about Jesus, about faith, life, and ultimately about us... The Master has given us a share of the wealth. God gives us everything we have and everything we are. It is God's will - God's hope for us - that we will develop our resources and become everything we can become. It is God's hope for us that we will live our lives fully, holding nothing back. It is God's hope for us that we will know the profound joy of staking out what we believe and then giving ourselves to it without counting the cost. It is God's hope for each of us that the time will come when God can say - "Well done, good and faithful servant."

God loves us so much that He gave an only son... That whoever believes in that son - trusts him, follows him - will live. There was never a greater gamble. The invitation of the Gospel is to bet your life on it. Amen.

Lord God: You have given us the resource. You have given us the responsibility. In Jesus Christ, you have invited us to invest it all. Now give us the courage - the will - the heart. Amen.